

# Making and Breaking of European Governments

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PHILIPP DREYER, OCT 5 2013

### Introduction

The durability of European governments, or, their 'making and breaking', is often accredited to their specific institutional environments. Accordingly, it is not solely elections that determine what kind of government forms or how long it survives. Rather, the systematic features of European parliamentary democracies, which make the executive accountable to the legislature, play an important role. Consequently, European governments are mostly the outcome of a bargaining process with other parliamentary parties, which in turn is influenced by a variety of institutional arrangements. However, caution should be advised; treating government formation and survival as a function of the institutional setup of parliamentary democracies is inordinately deterministic. Without doubt, parliamentary settings impose constraints on the processes of government formation and hence also influence government survival. Nevertheless, I will argue that the sources of government formation and stability are not exclusively limited to institutional frameworks. They importantly extend to the role of 'human agency' of politicians and parties, their motivations and ideological polarization, as well as to economic conditions. These factors affect the type of government that will be formed as well as its longevity. Institutional arrangements alone can thus not account for the 'making and breaking' of European governments.

### Parliamentary Democracies

Most European countries are parliamentary democracies. This has important implications for the question of what accounts for the 'making and breaking' of European governments. More precisely, we are interested in why some European governments persist as long as is constitutionally possible while others are inherently unstable. The relevance of the parliamentary system in this regard is that elections do not choose governments in a straightforward manner. In contrast to the presidential system, parliamentary regimes are characterised by parliamentary supremacy as well as the fusion of powers of the executive and legislative (Gallagher et al., 2011). Essentially, the executive derives its mandate from and is accountable to the legislature insofar as it needs to retain the support of a majority of legislators or else it will be forced to resign. However, most elections never produce a clear winner in form of a single majority government. This is a result of the electoral system of proportional representation, which has been adopted almost exclusively by all European countries (Lijphart, 1994). The establishment of a new government thus requires a strategic bargaining process among the legislative parties. The interactions between the legislature and the executive can therefore offer important insights into the dynamics of government formation, durability, and termination.

### Institutional Arrangements and Government Cycles

Institutional arrangements of European parliamentary regimes impose bargaining constraints on parties and thus affect the process of government formation. Among these, I will examine the role of the investiture vote, the vote of no-confidence, formateurs, and fixed interelection periods. As previously discussed, the defining feature of parliamentarism is that the executive is accountable to the legislature. This accountability is, in countries such as Germany or Greece, formally enshrined in the requirement of an investiture vote (Gallagher et al., 2011). The incoming government needs to win a vote by parliament to assume office. It could, of course, be argued that explicit investiture requirements are superfluous since any government must always be able to survive potential motions of no-confidence. That is, governments in European parliamentary democracies, except for Switzerland, are vulnerable

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to early defeat if they fail to maintain the support of a parliamentary majority in form of a vote of no-confidence.

Nevertheless, the investiture vote remains politically significant despite fulfilling the same function as a non-confidence vote because it changes the bargaining environment of parties. Without an investiture vote, it becomes generally easier to form a minority government, which relies on the support of other legislative parties (Strøm, 1990). Minority governments, however, are in theory unstable because particular policy issues may, at any time, evoke the disapproval of the opposition, in which case the termination of government could be imminent. When a minority government assumes office, it has, in fact, no guarantee to remain in power for any time because a majority in the opposition could defeat it. An investiture requirement will thus make the formation of minority governments less likely and will theoretically lead to more stable governments.

Other institutional settings that influence the bargaining process are the roles of the formateur and elections. A formateur is chosen by the head of the state and is responsible for forming a new government. Europe can generally be divided into countries where the head of state plays an active role in the process of government formation (e.g. France) and those where his or her duties are predominantly ceremonial (e.g. Germany). Without doubt, the role of the head of state is significant because a bargaining advantage is conferred on the first formateur, who should normally be able to form a legislative majority, assuming that he or she belongs to a pivotal party (Ansolabehere et al., 2005). Also noteworthy is the influence of elections and whether they have to be held at fixed intervals or whether the incumbent prime minister can choose their timing. While all European countries prescribe a maximum period during which an election must be held, some countries, such as the United Kingdom, do not specify a minimum. Consequently, elections can be chosen strategically at a time where the government has strong popular support and expects to be reelected (Andrews & Jackman, 2005).

## Limitations of the Institutionalist Approach

All the above-mentioned institutional arrangements seem to be theoretically connected, in a straightforward manner, to processes of government formation and termination. While they all do, in fact, offer some insights into the 'making and breaking' of European governments, no quick conclusions should be drawn. An overemphasis of the institutional environment of parliamentary regimes will inevitably lead to crudely deterministic judgments and a blatant disregard for the national idiosyncrasies that influence government stability. For instance, no-confidence motions can often be a risky undertaking if there is no viable alternative or if the opposition is fragmented (Huber, 1996). Such measures to dissolve the government are thus used sparingly in Europe because of the possibility of weakening the opposition. Countries like Germany have therefore adopted the amended version of a constructive vote of no confidence, which requires an alternative government to be pre-specified. The powers of the legislative to make or break governments are, however, in practice a lot less extraordinary than the theoretical potential of these institutional arrangements may suggest.

Furthermore, the relationship between investiture votes, minority governments, and their survivability is far from clear. Strom (1990) argues that minority governments are inherently unstable and that the investiture requirement makes the formation of majority governments more likely. The empirical realities of post-WW2 Europe, however, undermine this prediction in several cases. For instance, Romania has predominantly produced minority coalitions despite having formal investiture requirements. Crucially, the average duration of Romania's minority coalitions has been more than twice as long compared to any other government type (Gallagher et al., 2011). Similarly, Portugal, and Sweden have regularly had single-party minority governments that have, on average, outlived any other government type by far (*ibid.*). The institutional arrangement of the investiture vote is therefore limited in its ability to account for the making and breaking of European governments.

Lastly, the role of elections and their potential strategic advantage is at most suggestive; the political decisiveness of elections in western Europe is underlined by the fact that the incumbent government resumed office following an election in a third of all cases while it almost never returned when no intervening election was held (Strom et al., 2008). In contrast, central and eastern Europe exhibits a strong pattern of anti-incumbent voting, as a result of which governments seldom remain in power (Roberts, 2008). For this reason, the strategic advantage, which can be harnessed from choosing the timing of the election, is negligible for central and eastern European governments. Do

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not misread me here; I am not arguing that the institutional provisions of European parliamentary regimes cannot offer any insights into the dynamics of the 'making and breaking' of governments. I am merely advocating that other factors, such as idiosyncratic natures of the political system or the motivations of politicians, need to be considered to satisfactorily explain why some governments survive longer than others. To these factors I will tend in what follows.

## Human Agency of Politicians

I have so far demonstrated that an exclusive focus on institutional arrangements paints a deterministic picture of government formation, duration, and termination. Such a view effectively expunges the role played by politicians and presents parties as paralyzed agents who are completely constrained by institutional frameworks. By analysing the logic behind the formation of certain government types, I will demonstrate that the 'human agency' of politicians can, in fact, be politically decisive. Politicians are often regarded as rational and self-interested agents who want to maximise their own utility. This view emanated from rational choice theorists such as Anthony Downs (1957), who use economic concepts to explain political phenomena. Accordingly, politicians will be office-seeking to enjoy the prestige or the ability to exert power in a government position. Equally valid, politicians can be seen as being policy-oriented in their ambitions. This means that they prioritise being able to influence certain policy issues (i.e. to make a difference) over the intrinsic rewards that come with the job. It is of particular interest to see how the bargaining environment of parties is influenced by politicians' motivations.

If we were to assume that politicians are purely office-seeking, then we would predict the formation of a 'minimal winning' government. What this means is that the 'minimal winning' cabinet will only have those politicians as its members who belong to parties that are essential to maintaining a parliamentary majority. Any cabinet party that is not pivotal in this regard would not contribute anything in furthering the office-seeking goal but would free-ride off the other parties (Crombez, 1996). Therefore, the office-seeking assumption will always predict a government whose cabinet will have the least possible number of parties to maintain the support of a majority of legislators. Intuitively, it makes therefore sense that politicians' motivations should be included in calculations regarding processes of government formation. For in a predominantly office-seeking environment, parties can only have a 'bargaining edge' if they can help to establish a majority. Empirically, minimal winning coalitions have been established, on average, in a third of all cases in modern Europe compared to any other government type (Gallagher et al., 2011). Luxembourg, for instance, has almost exclusively had 'minimal winning' coalitions with only one exception, which highlights the relevance of the office-seeking assumption.

Nevertheless, the hypothesis of the office-seeking politician is at variance with the regular occurrence of minority governments in Europe. About a third of all modern European cabinets have, on average, been either a single-party minority or a minority coalition (ibid.). This, however, seems strange at first sight. For if there is a minority government, then there must be a majority in parliament, which chooses to remain in opposition. Clearly, politicians and parties cannot be purely office-seeking but must care also about policy implementation. If policy outcomes are a main concern, then it is easy to see why the opposition bench would be a favoured option in some cases. A coalition cabinet that contains parties that are not ideologically compatible will in all likelihood be unable to agree on any policy matters. In contrast, policy objectives can sometimes be more effectively pursued in the opposition through, for example, the legislative committee system (Strøm, 1990). In countries, such as Germany, where a consensus system of government prevails, bills are typically passed to committees before being debated in parliament, which makes cross-party consensus more likely (Lijphart, 1999). Evidently, policy-pursuing politicians will sometimes prefer to remain in the opposition if they can exercise less influence over policy in an ideologically fragmented cabinet.

The 'human agency' element of politicians and parties plays not only a role for the formation of minority governments or minimal winning coalitions but also for surplus majority governments. This is a government whose cabinet is oversized and includes parties that are not essential to a parliamentary majority. This kind of government type has occurred in more than twenty percent of all cases in modern Europe and is therefore a regular occurrence (Gallagher et al., 2011). While in some cases obvious institutional requirements of a *qualified* majority can account for the formation of a surplus majority government, we can also understand such a phenomenon with policy-pursuing motivations. Strong government parties sometimes enter a coalition cabinet with several smaller parties as a precaution (Carrubba and Volden, 2001). The worry is that once a government takes office, a seemingly insignificant

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coalition member will suddenly become disproportionately powerful because it can threaten to withdraw its support and thus block a parliamentary majority. Consequently, in a surplus majority government small coalition partners cease to be crucial for a majority and thereby lose their leverage or their influence over policy outcomes. Policy-oriented politicians thus use surplus majority cabinets as a strategic tool to not have to make too many concessions to other parties.

## Government Stability

I have so far demonstrated that politicians' motivations can be crucial in processes of government formation. This is because certain government types require that politicians are office-seeking, policy-pursuing, or both. Importantly, the significance of the 'human agency' element of politicians has effectively undermined the view that certain government types are always the outcome of specific institutional arrangements. However, we have to inquire into the ramifications of certain government types for the stability of the executive.

A commonly held belief is that majority governments are more stable than minority governments and that coalitions break apart at a much faster pace than single party governments. Despite its intuitive appeal, I still hold that the 'breaking' of governments is not simply due to the type of government. For instance, scholars have been led to believe that single-majority governments are inherently the most stable type of government because this has been, on average, the empirical reality for modern Europe (Gallagher et al., 2011). However, such a conclusion is invalid because single-party majority governments tend to occur almost exclusively in Western European countries, where stable governments are more common in general (ibid.). Most central and eastern European countries, except for Bulgaria and Lithuania, have never even had a single-party majority. Interestingly, Lithuania's two single-party majority governments were not even the most durable on average (ibid.). Institutional arrangements cannot simply account for the systematic differences between Eastern and Western Europe regarding government stability, electoral behaviour or government types. It is clear, therefore, that one cannot make any quick judgments about executive survivability by looking at government types only.

Even though general trends of government types are often observed in relation to government survival, the differences between eastern and western European countries demonstrate that national idiosyncrasies matter also. In this regard, I will discuss the effects of ideological fragmentation of the party system and of economic conditions on government stability. This reinforces the idea that apart from institutional arrangements, politicians' motivations are relevant to the 'breaking' of governments. I have argued earlier that ideological incompatibility can often be an obstacle to forming a coalition government. However, even when such an obstacle is overcome, an ideologically fragmented government will constantly struggle to agree on any policy matter and will thus find it difficult to survive (Budge & Keman, 1990). Statistical support for this is provided by Warwick (1992a) who shows that the more fragmented the parties in government are the more unstable the cabinet will be. Hence, if politicians are policy-pursuing a government will terminate when member parties have to compromise too much on their policy preferences.

Similarly, ethnic divisions adversely affect government stability. In Latvia, for instance, with its plethora of small parliamentary parties, governments are extremely short-lived because coalitions often need to have as many as six members to form a majority. The fragmentation of the party system, as well as its ideological diversity, thus plays an important role for government stability. Another important point is the effect of economic conditions on the ideological polarization of government and its longevity. Without doubt, socialist and conservative governments have opposing preferences on inflation rates and unemployment levels that crucially mirror their ideology. For instance, the success of a socialist government depends largely on achieving low unemployment rates because it derives its support predominantly from the working class. In this regard, Warwick (1992b) calculates that a one percent increase in unemployment is associated with a 6.2 percent increase in the likelihood of government collapse in modern Europe. The failure of a government to obtain certain levels of economic variables will thus inevitably endanger its survival, as it will be seen as an ideological departure from fundamental commitments (Robertson, 1983).

## Conclusion

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I have argued that the dynamics behind the 'making and breaking' of European governments are too complex to be accounted for in terms of institutional provisions alone. On the one hand, institutional arrangements of European parliamentary regimes do offer some important insights into the question of why some governments form, collapse, and re-form at a much faster pace than others. However, I have also pointed to the limitations in their explanatory potential by, for example, demonstrating that differences in Eastern and Western Europe require an understanding of their respective idiosyncrasies. Ultimately, I have demonstrated that politicians and parties are not completely constrained by institutional frameworks. Their motivations, or what I have referred to as 'human agency', matter enormously for government formation and their stability. This is because they explain the varying occurrences of different government types and why ideological differences and economic trends can often be politically decisive. Instead, viewing the 'making and breaking' of governments solely as a function of the institutional environment portrays politics as a predictable, deterministic and, most importantly, tedious enterprise.

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